METROPOLITAN COMMUNITY CHURCH OF VENTURA

Rev. Marge Ragona, Pastor
P.O. Box A-O
Ventura CA 93002

4949 Foothill Road
Sunday Services 6:30 p.m.
(805) 985-2594

May 25, 1981

Dear Pastors and Prison Ministry Reps:

Four months ago, when the Fellowship decided, on the basis of the Americom Report, to cease funding the Office of Institutional Ministry and to cease publishing CELLMATE, MCC Ventura and its Prison Representative, Chan Ward, felt that something needed to be done. Chan began publishing CELLMATE totally at his own cost -- and doing much of the work himself.

What we have found, in the interim, is that the cost of doing this is enormous. The cost is great for Chan, personally, in that there is a great deal of work involved just in the publishing aspect. A mailing of 3,000+ pieces takes organization, labor, and many hands to be done smoothly. The financial cost of the initial mailing is not <u>that</u> huge -- and Chan has been willing to fund that. What we have found, however, is that the <u>returns</u> -- pieces of mail that must be redeemed from the Post Office in order to keep the mailing list accurate and not waste money in sending CELLMATE to people who have been released, or to misdirect it, has become unbelievably expensive for Chan and for MCC Ventura.

As I thought about this, I realized that as Chan's pastor I was angry. In tracing my anger, I found that I was angry with a number of things -- one was the summary way in which the OIM was ended (or to use the Fellowship's term "suspended.") It would not have taken much to hold out until General Conference and permitted the Fellowship as a whole to have some input in what we wanted to do about OIM and CELLMATE. That decision was taken from us without our consideration.

The second thing that bothered me was the fact that the Prison Ministry was somehow seen as no longer a valid ministry for MCC. I must speak out, somehow, about that. So long as American society and our criminal justice system operates to <u>criminalize</u> the Gay community, <u>we will have a valid ministry in prisons</u>. Many men and women are in prison only because of behavior related directly to their sexuality. Many have been arrested for alcohol and drug-related charges, many stemming from those people's inability to deal with an oppressive society. Some have been arrested for criminal charges dealing with their attempting to survive by means outside the law, when legitimate channels are closed to them because of their frankly gay appearance, manner, demeanor or speech which has caused them to be unemployable otherwise. We can sit comfortably in our MCC's and be unwilling to reach out to them -- even with something so simple as a monthly newsletter -- or we can be burdened for them and attempt to do something to keep faith with them. Certainly CELLMATE is not a <u>major</u> publishing venture. I doubt that it was meant to be. It was an attempt

to let gay brothers and sisters in institutions know about MCC and let them know we care.

At Ventura, due entirely to Chan, we have had one hugely successful initial release of a prisoner, a number of reasonably successful attempts, and a number of failures. But we have learned from the failures, and we are supported by the successes. Had it not been for CELLMATE we would have done nothing to help, because they would not have known we were here.

Currently Ventura, through Chan and one other sponsor, is housing 5 Cuban refugees, 1 successfully rehabilitated ex-prisoner, one newly arrived prisoner, one young man recently released from a hospital because of a drug overdose (which was administered to him unknown to him), and aiding two other people who are having difficulties with the law. We are a church of 35. We are not experts in the field. We are Christians who see a need and in a very small way are attempting to meet it.

Our model for this is Jesus Christ, who told us to follow his example. We are to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, visit those in prison -- and MCC does very little of this through its top level leadership and programs at this point in our history. What we had begun in this area has summarily been stopped -- without asking those of us in the Fellowship if this , indeed, was our wish.

When our tithes and offerings are sent to the Fellowship from our local churches it has been with the intent to support on-going programs which were voted into the budget by the General Conference. These included the Office of Institutional Ministries. One church member has withdrawn a sizeable contribution to our church (probably our largest single tithe) out of protest to the Fellowship's handling of this issue. This hurts us as a local church, but as a Christian I can and do support his right to do this. No one needs to support any organization which does not exemplify their beliefs.

As I thought about this, I realized that we have alternatives available to us. We can once again vote funding for OIM into the Fellowship budget and mandate that the Fellowship spend it for that and for nothing else. We can vote at General Conference to seek a special annual offering for the work of OIM, just as we do the annual Fellowship offering, the annual Samaritan Theological Institute offering, the annual World Church Extension offering. Many, many denominations seek funds for missions (WCE), their denominational schools and colleges, and for what is generally termed "home missions." OIM is one of our home missions. It is charity beginning at home, attempting to alleviate suffering, rehabilitate, and educate our brothers and sisters who are from socio-economic levels and situations of oppression which we have not had to deal with -- for the majority of us, at least -- and which have brought them in conflict with the law, the psychiatric hospital system, or the juvenile justice system.

As gay Christians we must do something for them, and OIM is one way of reaching out to them. I suggest that this General Conference, as an order of new business that we vote to reinstate OIM, vote funding for CELLMATE, ask that a General Conference offering be taken for the work of OIM, and an annual offering be taken for OIM through our local churches.

We do this for our work in countries other than the United States, we do it for our denominational school, we do it for the work of the Fellowship. We have not yet, apparently, had our consciousness raised to recognize that home missions is equally important. Among those home missions, certainly OIM and the Washington Field Office programs are just as important as is our work in Europe, Africa, and New Zealand.

As we Christians become more successful and prosper -- because in MCC we have been able to "get our act together" with God's help -- it is time we realized that we also have to "take it on the road," and help those who have not yet realized that God loves them and accepts them and is willing to redeem them. It is our task to be agents of redemption and the hands and feet of our Savior here on earth. If we do not "work till Jesus comes" the task of redemption will not be done, in our community, by anyone else.

We have a mandate from God, if not from the Fellowship, to carry on the work Jesus began here on earth:

> The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because God has annointed me to preach the gospel to the poor; God has sent me to heal the broken hearted, to preach deliverance to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind, to set at liberty them that are bruised, to preach the acceptable year of the Lord.

Jesus also reminds us that "No one, having put a hand to the plough, and looking back, is fit for the domain of God."

We have put our hand to the plough in prison ministry -- and looked back -- and we are not fit for the domain of God. Let us rectify that as soon as possible.

In Christ's love,

Marge Ragona

Rev. Marge Ragona

P.S. Prison Reps -- Chan could use some support in the work he is doing. It is costing him and us in excess of $100 a month just to redeem the changed addresses from the Post Office. Chan cannot afford it all by himself and neither can Ventura. Will you seek private contributions to help in this work until the Fellowship can be moved to pick up where we left off. Even small contributions would encourage Chan to keep going.

Love. M.

May 25, 1981

Dearest Friends,

We do NOT want to lay a Financial Trip on Anyone !!

If each M.C.C. Church would Contribute $3.00 per month, we would have it made.

Thats a cheap $3.00 for the prison ministry. !!

And my Sisters + Brothers try and find this in your heart.

In Christs Love —

Chan Ward
P.O. Box 145
Summerland CA. 93067

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